

Jim Leftwich

Three Short Texts on Desemantized Writing

(published by Marco Giovenale at slowforward, May 2021)

fr - u - in
fr - u - in
fr - u - in
mo - in
fr - in

Jim Leftwich



Jim Leftwich

desemantized pieces in "lost and found times", n. 39, Nov. 1997, pp. 18-19

Desemantized Writing

For me, the practice of asemic writing began in processes I was using in the mid-to-late 1990s to write textual poems. Beginning with a large variety of source texts, those processes included syllabic and phonemic improvisation, varieties of cut-and-paste recombination (of letters, of morphemes, of words, of phrases, of sentences, and of paragraphs), varieties of misdirectional readings-as-writings (moving through paragraphs from right to left, from top to bottom and vice-versa in columns, reading multiple lines in wave patterns, reading paragraphs and pages diagonally, etc), and formulas for extracting, replacing and/or omitting letters from poems and paragraphs. The poems and paragraphs I was writing during those years were constructed, we could say, for reasons other than that of producing meaning.

Sometime late in 1996, I was warned that if I continued on the path I had chosen I would eventually wind up producing asemic texts.

In January 1998 I wrote the following to Tim Gaze: "An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning."

If I had known the term "desemantized writing" at that time, I would certainly have used it, rather than "asemic writing". The term 'desemantized writing' is much more accurate, much clearer, much more precisely descriptive of the processes from which my "asemic writing" emerged.

Again, let me emphasize that this little note is accurate in relation to my own processes and practices, and I am fully aware of the fact that it does not apply to the relationships that many others have with the theory and practice of asemic writing.

If I had known the term "desemantized writing" in the 1990s, rather than the term "asemic writing", then Tim Gaze and I would have been using the term "desemantized writing" in our correspondence. The term "desemantized writing" would have been used in our international exchanges through the mail art and small press poetry networks. Chances are that Tim's magazine would have been named "desemantized writing". Then, sometime around 2005, when Michael Jacobson encountered the magazine and the word, maybe instead of "asemic writing" he would have used the term "desemantized writing" in his interviews and essays.

It's interesting (again: speaking only for myself) to rewrite this imaginary history, but unfortunately, here and now, in 2021, it is only a kind of game. I didn't learn of the term "desemantized writing" for another decade-and-a-half, when Marco Giovenale told me about its use among Italian verbovisual poets in the 1960s and 70s.

05.18.2021

Keep Moving

I was a poet, and for me that meant pushing the edges of poetry, and the edges of myself while writing poetry. The line was an edge, and the rhyme was an edge, and the stanza was an edge, and the syllable was an edge. Eventually it became impossible to ignore the idea of the letter as an edge. Once having agreed to that, it became impossible to ignore the shapes of the letter -- first the shapes of the printed letters, in an array of fonts, and then the shapes of the handwritten letters.

From the outset, the idea of producing meanings had been for me subordinate to the idea of making poems. If all I had wanted to do was produce meanings, I would have written conventional sentences and paragraphs. But that was not what I wanted.

So I wrote poems, and I pushed the edges of the poem, and in doing that I was pushing the edges of myself, my sense of satisfaction and achievement, my sense of my own skills and competence, and I was never satisfied, intentionally, by choice, never satisfied, I refused to accept the sense of being satisfied, so eventually, inevitably, I found myself producing desemantized or asemic writings.

And that was a plateau, a stage, and I knew from the outset that I was only passing through, that I would never be satisfied with desemantized or asemic writing, any more than I had been satisfied with writing conventional poems.

Over the years a community of asemic writers has become active and visible and, to the extent that I am a part of it at all, my role has evolved to be a kind of advocate for incessant criticality. As a participant in the conversation around asemic writing, I can be counted on to say something similar to "yes, you are right, but..." Yes, you are right, but that is not enough, it is not even particularly important. What is important is to keep moving. Asemic writing works for you? Fantastic. Now move on and do something else.

05.19.2021

OF COURSE THE ASEMIC IS ABSURD

If I am writing about the word "asemic", I am thinking about patience and persistence. I am thinking about failure as a source of energy, as that which keeps an absurdist idea of enlightenment alive and almost thriving. Standing in the absurd center of the asemic universe, we are surrounded by unexamined exits and entrances, unexplored starting-points, multiple escape-routes leading out in all directions.

We need to synchronize our watches, then throw them all away. We need to get on the same page of the same map-book, then throw all the maps away. We need to set our compasses, and throw them away. We must promise each other to get together, at some unspecified time and place, later in our lives, to define our terms and make public our consensus definitions. Until then, we have some exploring to do, some making and some thinking, some reading and some writing.

Tim Gaze wrote, in an email responding to my recent texts (05.21.2021), that "asemic is an absolute state, whereas desemantizing is a process or matter of degree".

He also wrote in the same email that he "consciously let go of asemic writing several years back".

On January 27, 1998, I wrote to Tim, saying "the asemic text would seem to be an ideal, an impossibility, but possibly worth pursuing for just that reason."

Desemantized writing is not an ideal, is not an impossibility. It is a very specific kind of writing, produced for very specific reasons. To desemantize writing is to intentionally make it less readable, less capable of participating in the language-game of giving information.

We might aspire to the absolute state of asemic writing, producing beautiful and/or provocative failures in our quest, but we achieve desemantized writing, to one degree or another, whenever we choose to do so.

In response to my recent texts, John M. Bennett wrote (05.20.2021) "i like 'desemanticized' better than 'asemic' myself; the latter term was always a bit misleading, even downright wrong sometimes, I thought; except perhaps in a few situations..."

In the late 1990s, "asemic" was not the word I wanted or needed, but it was the best I had at the time. For the past 20 years or so I have been exploring alternatives to the word "asemic". For now, and for my purposes (which are not necessarily the same purposes as those of some likely readers of this text), "desemantized" (or "desemanticized") is an improvement, a step in the right direction. It is a provisional solution to a problem.

These days, the term "asemic writing" is very widely used, and is surely in no danger of being discarded or replaced. My thoughts about the term "desemantized writing" will circulate, if at all,

within the context of the global asemic writing community. As I write this, in the late spring of 2021, the theory and practice of asemic writing are not in any sense dead, the possibilities have not been exhausted. The Sisyphean struggle to attain the absolute state of asemic writing, absurd though it may be, continues to yield moments of existential fulfillment, and perhaps every now and then even a kind of happiness.

My hope for my recent writings is that they might invigorate an increasingly faceted vision of the world of all things asemic.

may 2021